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KT photo | **Tim Bath**
Rob Burgess, Tribune night editor

House of Burgess: Fake 'Kingdom of North Sudan'

Disney making film about Virginian's African 'nation'

By Rob Burgess
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Until last year, a piece of land called Bir Tawil between Egypt and Sudan lay ungoverned by either country. Egypt recognizes the 22nd parallel as its southern border, while Sudan recognizes a 1902 demarcation drawn by the United Kingdom. And there it sat, until someone 6,000 miles away had a bright idea.

"Jeremiah Heaton was playing with his daughter in their Abingdon, Virginia home last winter when she asked whether she could be a real princess,"

reported The Washington Post's Ileana Najarro on July 12, 2014. "Heaton, a father of three who works in the mining industry, didn't want to make any false promises to Emily, then 6, who was 'big on being a princess.' But he still said yes. ... Within months, Heaton was journeying through the desolate southern stretches of Egypt and into an unclaimed 800-square-mile patch of arid desert. There, on June 16 — Emily's seventh birthday — he planted a blue flag with four stars and a crown on a rocky hill. The area, a sandy expanse sitting along the Sudanese border, morphed ... into what Heaton and his family call the 'Kingdom of North Sudan.' There, Heaton is the self-described king and Emily is his princess."

Heaton is no stranger to the spotlight, running twice unsuccessfully for Virginia's 9th Congressional District, as an independent in 2010, and a Democrat in 2012. He was the Independent Green Party of Virginia endorsee for Congress in 2010 and served two years as district vice chairman, according to the party.

The very sight of a pale, flag-carrying American claiming a swath of unclaimed African land for himself might recall bad memories of centuries of brutal European colonization for some. At least one movie company thought differently.

"Stephany Folsom has been tapped to pen the script for 'The Princess of North Sudan,' Disney's unique princess tale," reported Borys Kit of The Hollywood Reporter May 13. "Morgan Spurlock, the filmmaker behind

documentaries 'Super Size Me' and 'The Greatest Movie Ever Sold,' is producing the family adventure along with Richard Arlook."

Heaton seems to be attempting to reverse-engineer some goodwill around this inherently selfish endeavor in light of the movie announcement. Last week, he launched an online Indiegogo campaign he's calling "The World's First CrowdFunded Nation." Started last week, the campaign has a goal of \$250,000, and is 2 percent funded, raising \$5,055 with 38 days left. Perks bestowed by the new monarch for donation to his kingdom include an honorary title for \$25, the title of court jester for \$200, or a knighthood for \$300.

"Having created the world's newest nation in the heart of the east African desert, the question became, 'What do we do with it?' Emily, having learned about hungry children in Africa from her elementary school teacher, stated very clearly, 'Grow a garden as big as our country to feed people!'" according to the campaign.

Disney should really take some time for self-reflection with this decision. The company has anything but a sterling history when it comes to race issues in general. (Don't get me started on 1946's "Song of the South," 1953's "Peter Pan" or 1955's "Lady and the Tramp.") Prior to this latest film, just two animated Disney movies have been set in Africa: "The Lion King" (1994) featured only anthropomorphic animals, and the only main human characters in "Tarzan" (1999) are English.

Princesses don't get to exist in a vacuum. The title is but a cog in an antiquated monarchical political system. This hereditary form of government in most modern usages carries with it an air of quaint romanticism, its charms being the sole reason for its otherwise inexplicable continued existence. So far, no other countries have recognized Heaton's claims. If he had planted his flag even 200 years ago, he would have fit right in there. New monarchies claiming ownership over a desolate land through flag planting would not have only been tolerated, but commonplace. Now, not so much.

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